

This vision is featured in the 1978 East Cambridge Riverfront Plan. The reality that now exists after a decade of work is remarkably faithful to the original concept.

11 . Urban Design and Environment

Questions of appropriate transportation and housing policy are naturally at the forefront of public discussion. However, our daily perceptions of the quality of the environment around us frequently rest on the observation of subtle details of design and fit: matters of landscaping, materials, or building design, that can too often be overlooked in the discussions of the larger issues of the day.

Assumption

> The quality of the city's urban environment in building design, site development, and building and site material is a major asset that defines, in part, the city's appeal as a place in which to live and work.

In straining to meet the many basic obligations of the city to its citizens housing opportunities, employment options, education of our children -it is tempting to overlook the tangible value of the quality of the city's environment. Investment in that environment may be expensive whether through direct means such as park improvements, street trees, and brick sidewalks, or indirectly through development potential foregone as a result of rezoning. However, the care and attention paid to a high quality environment is repaid through the commitment residents and employers make to the city, the demand for housing it creates and through the valuable commercial space that might be built. The revenues from those sources are quite direct and the benefit easily calculated. In addition, a commitment to quality helps mediate and reduce the potential conflicts that inevitably arise as a result of the dense urban living that characterizes so much of life in Cambridge.

Design review sessions with the community helped the architect and the developer create an especially successful new building at 1280 Massachusetts Avenue.



Assumption

> Much of the city's special appeal can be traced to its long development history and the legacy of that history still in existence today. New additions to the city should be compatible with that legacy while also innovatively and creatively responding to contemporary needs.

Much of that history was viewed with indifference or contempt not too many years ago. But as the physical products of the late twentieth century and beyond come to dominate and define the character of so much of suburban and rural America, and many inner city districts as well, Cambridge's past begins to define an ever more unique and distinctive environment in an expanding sea of rootless trendiness. Wood frame and brick masonry, real streets and pedestrians on sidewalks, moderate scale and complexity of uses, trees, grass and buildings instead of asphalt all speak to historical precedents which need not limit innovation but which can define the limits within which it can flourish.

Assumption

> *With rare exceptions, development should be required to enhance the pedestrian environment, enhance the public realm along city streets and ensure and deepen the quality of the experience of those who walk through Cambridge.*

Much of current building technology and custom and the accommodations typically made to the automobile, if left unchecked, are invariably hostile to the best interests of a sensitive urban pedestrian environment. Shadows, wind, barren plazas, multiple driveways, blank building walls and street front parking lots, are all examples of building patterns where design is indifferent to impacts on the public realm. In a city where walking is a traffic mitigation measure as well as a pleasant experience and a social opportunity, real damage is done if, over time, the cumulative effect of each indifferent or unfriendly building or site design produces a public environment unkind to the pedestrian and pleasant only for the car.

Assumption

> It is appropriate that the City should develop urban design and development standards for Cambridge that will provide a guide and framework for all future additions and changes to the built environment. It is appropriate that those standards should vary to reflect the diversity of the many environments found throughout the city.

In a city where context should play a defining role in shaping new development, it should be the obligation of the City to define those building, site and urban design standards to which new development will be expected to conform. In developing guidelines for East Cambridge, Central Square, Harvard Square and North Massachusetts Avenue, the City began the process of defining its expectations. These guidelines were developed in conjunction with major zoning revisions for the affected areas. Those zoning revisions were crafted such that the development guidelines can be mandated for, or at least substantially guide review of, new development which is subject to discretionary permits before the Planning Board or the Board of Zoning Appeal.



A sidewalk cafe in North Cambridge helps make a friendlier urban experience along this part of Massachusetts Avenue

Many critical areas of Cambridge, however, are not covered by any systematic set of development guidelines. Even where such guidelines do exist, construction which requires no discretionary permit (special permit or variance) need not conform. Without discouraging innovation or precluding design and development options which better serve the public interest, it is important to define a range of development standards from mandatory to recommended, which reflect the diversity of character from neighborhood to neighborhood, and which are consistently and fairly applied to all development. The basic elements of the zoning ordinance: height, use, density and setbacks, are rudimentary guidelines for development. At that level each rezoning adopted further refines the City's development policy. Even at that basic level much work remains to be done: several districts and much of the city's land area is, for instance, not subject to a height limit.

Many more subtle issues of building design, materials, landscaping and site design, modulations of heights, transitions between uses and scales of building, the relationship of buildings to public streets, regulation of the design and placement of parking facilities are among many other issues which should be explored. Those that are critical should be made mandatory, others may be appropriately cast as suggestions.

The Linear Park in North Cambridge transformed an obsolete rail corridor into an enjoyable urban amenity. It creates a pleasant connection of North Massachusetts Avenue to Alewife Station as well as to Davis Square Station.



Urban Design and Environment Policies

These policies take into account the physical environmental aspects of all policies contained in this document so that appropriately responsive urban design plans for the various parts of the city may be made.

Design Review

Design review mechanisms are in place for some parts of the city: the East Cambridge riverfront, Harvard Square, and Central Square among a few other districts in the city, are the subject of detailed design standards and urban development plans which are enforced through special or planned unit development permits issued by the Planning Board. However, there are still significant areas of the city which have no such standards or plans. Even in the areas identified above many projects not requiring a special permit may ignore the standards that are in place. Consistent and reliable regulations are needed to serve all segments of the community, providing direction for developers as well as protection for residents who live near the development and for the citizenry at large.



All buildings in the East Cambridge Riverfront underwent detailed review to ensure compliance with the City's plan and design guidelines.

Existing guidelines for particular sections of the city should continue to be followed (including The East Cambridge Riverfront, University Park, Central Square, Harvard Square, North Mass Ave. and North Point). Policy 57 suggests that like existing guidelines that have been developed and refined over many years, new guidelines should also reflect the specific character and goals for the different parts of the city. In particular, new guidelines are needed for portions of Alewife, the remaining Industry B zoning districts, and the Memorial Drive riverfront, and areas in prominent locations where new development will be very visible and contribute prominently to the visual image and environmental quality of the city for many years into the future.

POLICY 57

Design review for new development should be established throughout the city for all areas where future development will be of a scale or quantity that will potentially change or establish the character of the district.

POLICY 58

Even in areas where the character of a district is firmly established and new development is likely to be very modest, design review should be required where small scale changes are likely to disrupt the desired district character.

Policy 58 is intended to address the fact that, for many areas, a single new project that is unsympathetic to its surroundings can have a negative impact that is out of proportion to its mere size. For example, a corner store in a purely residential area often stands out; this can be a welcome addition or an eyesore depending upon the character of the design. In especially distinguished areas, a historic district designation may be appropriate and the design review very detailed. In still other circumstances, where the character is more modest, the neighborhood conservation district approach may be most appropriate. For some other areas, review of only the most significant new projects might be conducted through a special permit process under the zoning ordinance, where only the most generalized design standards might be sufficient.

Through the design review process in Harvard Square, two developers were required to coordinate their site improvements, resulting in fewer curb cuts and a better walkway system for pedestrians.



Urban Design Standards

In order to guide physical growth in the ways outlined in this policy document, urban design standards need to be strengthened where existing and articulated where lacking.

Two major points need to be addressed: height limits should be imposed throughout the city, and the density bonus granted in the zoning ordinance for uses which abut particularly wide streets or public open space should be eliminated. Both of these outdated provisions of the zoning ordinance are antithetical to more recent efforts to ensure that new development will be in scale with the positive aspects of the existing character of Cambridge.

More generally, the application of a zoning designation to an area in the city should accurately reflect public policy with regard to the character of that area. Many development conflicts have arisen in the past because the existing character of a zoning district has been quite different (and usually much less dense) than that permitted by the dimensional standards of the applicable zoning. Where that disparity exists the zoning designation should be changed or the inappropriate features of the zoning districts regulations should be altered.

Policy 60 recommends that design standards should be crafted for areas subject to major future development. In developing these standards, the following criteria should always be considered:

Buildings should enhance the street-level experience by providing transparency at the ground floor, providing "eyes on the street" for safety and animation;

The particular and differing characters of the streets throughout the city should be recognized; guidelines should reinforce desired setbacks, types of landscaping, building frontages, etc.; and

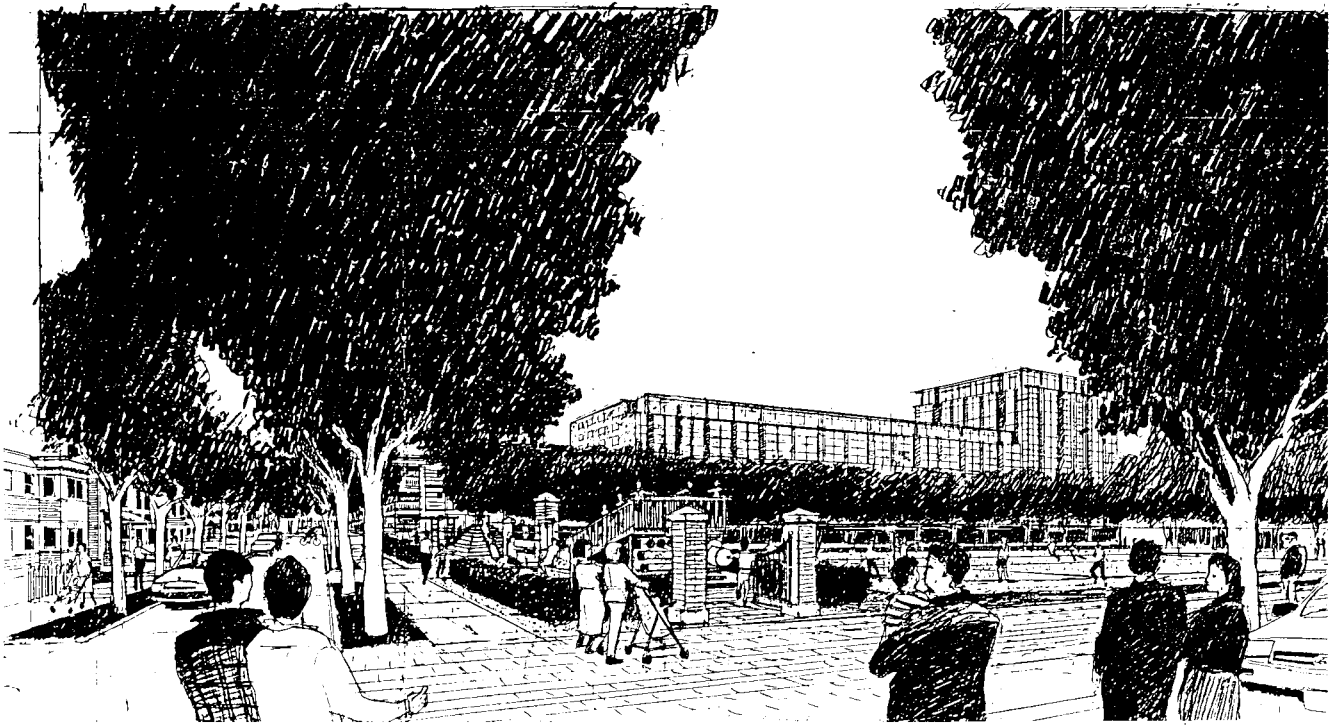
Open spaces {parks, squares, landscaped setbacks, urban wilds} should be linked by safe and attractive streets and sidewalks; the overall city goal is to realize a complete system of public ways and open spaces. In certain instances, the effectiveness of existing open space facilities can be increased through additional open space or other forms of pedestrian and recreational links between both publicly and privately owned spaces; the creation of such links should receive high priority and encouragement.

POLICY 59

The regulations for all zoning districts in Cambridge should reflect the city's fundamental urban design and environmental objectives: height, setback, use, site development, and density standards imposed should be consistent with or advance those urban design objectives.

POLICY 60

Urban design and environmental standards should be developed for all areas of the city which are or may be in the future subject to redevelopment or significant new development.



Steps are being taken to determine the design of a park that will help transform the character of the area south of Pacific Street, adjacent to University Park. This illustration is one example of how the site might be designed.

It is important to note that there are historic district regulations already in place in many parts of the city. Policy 61 recommends that any new urban design standards be considered in the light of these existing controls so that there is no contradiction in city policies.

More generally, however, there are many districts and neighborhoods in the city which while not so special as to require detailed, historically precise preservation, nevertheless have a feel and character that reflects their evolution over many decades if not centuries. That context gives Cambridge its special identity and should be respected, if not continually replicated exactly, in any design standards or zoning districts. That context should be respected as well whenever any new physical additions are made to the city's environment.

Policy 62 recognizes the need for urban design standards to ensure that appropriate transitions are made between differing uses. Where conflicts are inevitable, concessions should be made to the needs of the more vulnerable use; for example, residential uses should be shielded from the negative impacts of an adjacent industrial or office use, through landscaping, setbacks, and architectural design.

POLICY 61

Urban design standards should reflect the historic context within which change will occur while permitting design that is responsive to contemporary circumstances.

POLICY 62

As transitions between differing uses are extremely important in a densely developed city, urban design standards should be developed to ensure that these transitions are made properly, respecting the maximum extent possible the needs of each contrasting use.